

Knight or Wight in Keats's 'La Belle Dame'? An ancient ditty reconsidered¹

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Much like the protagonist of Keats's famous poem, literary critics have often been driven to feverish anguish over the textual condition of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'.² If one were to adapt the poem's (or poems') first line, 'Oh what can ail thee, critic of Keats?', the answer might well be the textual undecidability of the poem itself. This essay will offer a strategy for dealing with this irresolution without having to decide the text of 'La Belle Dame' and, simultaneously, a possible cure for a textual ailment afflicting literary criticism more widely.

It is necessary to begin with an account of the poem's textual evolution, as it can be ascertained from the surviving copies, as dispassionately as possible. Textual histories of 'La Belle Dame' outstrip the poem's own bibliographic proliferation, but few are free from critical bias, and some even introduce their own corruptions of transmission. During late April 1819 Keats wrote an early draft of the poem into his long, spring letter to George and Georgiana Keats.³ Although this draft constitutes an already substantially

¹ This article is dedicated to my students of 'Mediaevalism', in memory of happy mead-fuelled tutorials at St Andrews, 2004. I'd like to thank Dr Helen Smith of the University of York for commenting on an early draft of this work.

² References to the poem are, initially at least, from Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 357-9.

³ Stillinger reasons 21 or 28 April: Stillinger, *Poems*, p. 643. See also *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), II, 95-6 and Jack Stillinger, *The Texts of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 232.

complete and recognisable version, there are nevertheless a number of cancellations, insertions and revisions in this manuscript.⁴ The poem's first surviving incarnation in a world of readers exhibits rather than erases its own variations; it is writing that charts its process of change, does not declare itself as decided product. Keats may have made a now-lost holograph fair-copy, perhaps incorporating the draft revisions into a resolved text. This however is supposition, as no other manuscripts in Keats's hand exist. Rather, the poem is first propagated by Keats's male transcribers. A copy made by Charles Brown, whom the poet lived with during the period of the poem's early gestation, and two by Richard Woodhouse (the second merely an iteration of the first) survive to us.⁵ In general these transcripts corroborate the draft and its revisions, making two further substantive changes (changing 'hill side' to 'hill's side' in line 36 and 'Thee hath' to 'hath thee' in line 40), adding a subtitle ('A Ballad') and numbering the stanzas. Woodhouse apparently altered the so-called 'accidentals' of Keats's holographs almost habitually,⁶ and Brown was not above making occasional substantive changes, although these may have been with Keats's approval and even authority, for in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats of February 1819, the poet relates how he and Brown 'sit opposite one another all day authorizing'.⁷ Brown and Woodhouse might be thought of, in a small but significant sense, as collaborators with Keats in the production of three of the four surviving texts of the poem which critics frequently group together as representing one of

⁴ Andrew Bennett discusses some of these revisions in his admirable chapter on 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 113-127 (pp. 121 & 124).

⁵ Stillinger, *Texts*, pp. 50-1 & 232-3. Also Stillinger, *Poems*, p. 644

⁶ Stillinger, *Texts*, pp. 43-4.

⁷ Letters, II, 61. Stillinger, *Texts*, pp. 54-5.

two versions, best referred to by its opening line, the ‘knight-at-arms’ version.⁸ It is possible to acquiesce in this construction of two versions of the poem (though ‘traditions’ might be a better word), while at the same time noting that the first draft represents a slightly different case within the ‘knight-at-arms’ tradition and is the site of its own peculiar set of textual complexities. A different tradition is witnessed by the text printed on 10 May 1820, approximately a year after the poem’s initial composition, in Leigh Hunt’s journal *The Indicator*.⁹ This, the only text printed during Keats’s lifetime, displays a number of variations, prominent among which is the substitution of ‘wretched wight’ for ‘knight-at-arms’.¹⁰ It is possible that Hunt, as Keats’s editor, was responsible for some or all of these changes and it is equally possible that Keats consented to these interventions and even cooperated on them.¹¹ Keats’s associations with Hunt during this period were close, to the point of moving into the Hunt household six days before the poem’s publication in *The Indicator*.¹² Moreover, the existence in 1845 of a now-lost holograph copy beginning ‘Ah what can ail thee, wretched wight’, suggests that Keats

⁸ Brown and Keats’s collaborative working relationship is more conspicuous in their cooperation on *Otho the Great*.

⁹ Stillinger, *Texts*, p. 233 and Stillinger, *Poems*, p. 644.

¹⁰ Jerome McGann was the first to discuss a number of these variations in detail; Jerome McGann, ‘Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism’, *Modern Language Notes*, 49 (1979), 988-1032 (pp. 1001-3).

¹¹ Stillinger mistrusts Hunt and other periodical editors of Keats’s poems, seeing them as the kind of collaborators who diffract, rather than bring to realisation Keats’s intentions. See *Texts*, p. 73. Here, we are on the edge of speculation, however well informed. The supposition that Keats revised the poem in response to earlier criticisms of his verse must also remain tentative. Even if true, these circumstances of production provide no grounds for negating the revisions. We do not know what a late Keats poem would look like, written in a world in which he was not attacked in print; such an ideal world (like the ideal poem) does not exist.

¹² Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 513. Admittedly, Keats seems not to have felt comfortable in Hunt’s home soon after moving in. For the text of *The Indicator* version, I have referred to the photographic reproduction in Motion’s biography, p. 514.

was complicit in at least one of the *Indicator* variations.¹³ On the basis of this printed text and lost holograph, we might sensibly talk of a ‘wretched wight’ tradition of performing the poem, one in which Hunt (and perhaps the *Indicator* compositors) collaborated.

Criticism of ‘La Belle Dame’ has often been accompanied, and at times defined, by some anxiety over which of these versions is more authoritative. This is not just a scholarly argument over the ontological boundaries of the poem, although it is partly that, with many commentators subscribing, not always overtly, to a theory of text which posits an ideal or *Ur*-poem lying behind a number of more or less corrupt textual manifestations.¹⁴ This important issue aside, many interpretative and evaluative readings of the poem are contingent on one or other version. A great deal is at stake over the difference between a knight and a wight, not least the title by which we agree to refer to this poem: *The Indicator* prints ‘La Belle Dame sans Mercy’ (though all in upper case) in place of the other texts’ ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’.¹⁵ Anecdotally, William Morris’s belief in the poem as the aetiological germ of literary Pre-Raphaelitism was so strong that

¹³ This was in the possession of John Jeffrey, Georgiana Keats’s second husband. See Stillinger, *Texts*, p. 233 and *Poems*, p. 744.

¹⁴ Stillinger is upfront in expressing such belief, even admitting, in knowledge of its controversy, to the pursuit of a text ‘in Keats’s mind if not in his handwriting’. Stillinger, *Texts*, p. 12.

¹⁵ See Theresa M. Kelley, ‘Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”’, *ELH*, 54 (1987), 333-362 for arguments about the ‘Englishing’ of the title and Bennett, pp. 116-7 for a rejection of these arguments. It might be noted that the blackletter edition of Chaucer’s works first to include (through mistaken attribution) ‘La belle dame sans mercie’ [sic] is internally inconsistent, printing ‘La belle Dame sans mercy’ in the closing *Lenvoy*. See Thomas Speght, ed., *The Workes of Our Ancient and learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer* (London: Adam Islip, 1598).

he regarded the *Indicator* version as almost heretical.¹⁶ For Francis Utley, in a moment of methodological horse and cart exchange, the *Indicator* version must also be rejected because its punctuation is less accommodating to his rather brilliant suggestion that the second pair of lines in each of the opening two stanzas (all normally thought to be in the voice of the narrator) might be spoken by the knight/wight, in the question-and-answer exchange typical of sparse, ballad dialogue.¹⁷ John Barnard finds the wight-version (which he boldly terms ‘another poem’) more self-conscious and ironic than the knight-version and dismisses it as an example ‘of Keats’s inability to judge public taste’.¹⁸ David Pirie grounds a reading of the poem as subversively political and sexually libertarian more convincingly in the text of the wight-version.¹⁹ Writing eighty years after Colvin, Andrew Motion expresses the opposing view on the merits of the *Indicator* variants, claiming ‘in purely literary terms, they toughen and discipline the poem, making it resonate with a creative kind of self-consciousness’.²⁰ Whether we wish to accept the conventional reading of the lady as a kind of bewitching succubus depends to a large extent on whether or not we read the knight-tradition, in which the speaker declares ‘she lulled me asleep’. In the other tradition the speaker and the lady’s love-making seems characterised by a greater degree of mutuality, for the wight relates more innocently that

¹⁶ Sidney Colvin, *John Keats* (London: Macmillan, 1917), p. 470. Jerome McGann quotes Colvin at length, believing him to be influential in propagating the view that the *Indicator* version is inferior on aesthetic grounds. McGann cites from the second (1920) edition. McGann, pp. 1029-30, fn. 25.

¹⁷ Francis Lee Utley, ‘The Infernos of Lucretius and of Keats’s La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, *ELH*, 25 (1958), 105-121, p. 116.

¹⁸ John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 93-4.

¹⁹ David B. Pirie, ‘Keats’, in *The Romantic Period*, vol 5 *The Penguin History of Literature* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 343-394.

²⁰ Motion, p. 156. Motion does not substantiate his claims.

‘we slumber’d on the moss’.²¹ Stillinger’s own criticism, while impressively attentive to literary multiplicity in almost every other way imaginable, reverts to a singular textuality when discussing Keats’s poem. Following his consideration of ‘multiple Keats’, Stillinger observes ‘there have been (and presumably will continue to be) many different explanations of what ails the knight-at-arms in *La Belle Dame*’,²² but nowhere in his discussion does he acknowledge that the knight is also, plurally, a wight.²³

We see then, in much of the writing on ‘La Belle Dame’, an urge to fix the poem, to render static its textual dynamics. Just as the Grecian Urn seeks to represent its youthful lovers as unchanging and beyond worldly compromise, so attempts are made to petrify the textual music played out by Keats’s ballad. It might be thought a little odd that in a literary culture which places great value on fruitful ambiguity, from Empson’s seven types to Stillinger’s ‘token’ fifty-nine interpretations of ‘The Eve of St Agnes’,²⁴ textual ambiguities are more rarely permitted to bear their full promise. Happily, reality is more kinetic than potential and there is no need to sacrifice any of the possibilities offered by a multi-textual poem in the pursuit of aesthetic idealism. A way of freeing the poem into something like its true textual kinesics was first offered by Jerome McGann,

²¹ Other aspects of the lady’s presentation are more sympathetic in the wight-tradition; her ‘wild wild eyes’ have become ‘wild sad eyes’ and the speaker sets her on his steed at the beginning of their encounter, that is to say, before the lady’s look of seeming love and ‘sweet moan’ may have influenced his judgement, as might be argued to be the case in the knight-tradition.

²² Jack Stillinger, ‘The “story” of Keats’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 246-260 (p. 257).

²³ Nor does he refer to the parallel plot of the wight-tradition in Jack Stillinger, ‘Reading Keats’s Plots’, in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. by Hermione de Almeida (Boston MA: G. K. Hall, 1990), pp. 88-102. For a contrastingly pluralist celebration, see Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Romantic Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁴ Jack Stillinger, *Reading “The Eve of St. Agnes”: the multiples of complex literary transaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

arguing that ‘we are not dealing here with textual errors, but with textual options’ and referring to ‘poems’ in the plural.²⁵ This observation, not pursued thoroughly enough in subsequent criticism of Keats, requires more contemplation and development.²⁶ I wish to extend McGann’s approach by insisting more dogmatically on my earlier nomenclature of two ‘traditions’ to replace the common currency of the term ‘versions’. There are, after all, four surviving textual versions (or five, depending on the status one attaches to Woodhouse’s second transcript), but these, together with knowledge of the lost Jeffrey holograph, do initiate two more or less distinct textual traditions which have persisted into the bibliographic history of the poem. Furthermore, I wish to offer a new argument concerning the processes of production that result in these traditions; that they are textually mediaevalizing.

That ‘La Belle Dame’, like many other Romantic poems, is mediaevalist in various ways (subject-matter, form, technique and even diction), is self-evident and some of the complexities that attend this mediaevalism have been extremely well-documented. But let us reconsider its modes of production, bearing this in mind. ‘La Belle Dame’, in its several versions and traditions, lies at the centre of a number of social, intertextual, formal and reproductive networks, all of which interact, and at times blur, in the creation of the poem. The social occasions for the poem’s composition are several. As previously noted, Keats at least partially drafts ‘La Belle Dame’ in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats in America. The poem may have been written partly in response to, even because

²⁵ McGann, p. 1005. Kelley misreads McGann in saying that he prefers the *Indicator* version. Kelley, p. 335.

²⁶ For criticism that does keep these dynamics in play as much as possible, though not for reasons of the textual economy I am proposing here, see Marjorie Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (1988), pp. 44-95 and Bennett, pp. 113-27.

of, George's failing fortunes in the New World, as Fiona Robertson persuasively suggests, reading the ailing knight as a George figure, trapped in a failed adventure romance.²⁷ More recently the chance encounter with Coleridge while out walking on 11 April,²⁸ shortly before the poem's draft, has been re-emphasized as a spur to the poem's composition, together with the publication of Z's hostile review in *Blackwood's Magazine*.²⁹

Intertextually, source, analogues and allusions for the poem seem to proliferate with each new scholar who comes to the work. There is, of course, the Middle English translation of Alain Chartier's narrative poem, from which Keats's poem takes its name, made by Sir Richard Ros in the fifteenth century, but still attributed to Chaucer during Keats's lifetime. Lucretius, Dante, Spenser, Burton, Percy's *Reliques* and other anonymous ballads and Coleridge have all been suggested as models or sources.³⁰ Most recently Lynette Felber's literary detective-work has carefully threaded Keats's contemporary Ann Taylor into this curiously woven web.³¹ As Keats's own oeuvre refers to 'an ancient ditty, long since mute, / In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy"', we are obliged to at least consider 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' as the text for Porphyro's

²⁷ Fiona Robertson, 'Keats's New World: An Emigrant Poetry', in *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, ed. by Michael O'Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). pp. 27-47.

²⁸ Rollins, *Letters*, II, 88.

²⁹ See Paul Bentley, who traces the poetry as ailment trope back to Z's review, and explains the poem's attitude as a response to that review. Paul Bentley, 'Caviare from the Count: Blackwood's and John Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci', *Romanticism*, 9 (2003), 55-67.

³⁰ For a fuller catalogue, see Utley, p. 105.

³¹ Lynette Felber, 'Ann Taylor's "The Maniac's Song": An Unacknowledged Source for Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"', *ANQ*, 17 (2004), 29-36.

song in 'The Eve of St Agnes'.³² Keats becomes source for Keats. This intertextual chain of adaptation, assimilation and re-writing does not stop with Keats however.

Edwin Muir's 'The Enchanted Knight' recognises the spirit in which Keats's poem writes itself into existence from a nexus of other materials and responds in the same spirit, 'Lulled by La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.³³

In composing a poem from out of these circumstances and materials, Keats deploys the ballad form to re-work, in an oblique and allusive manner, the material of a misattributed translation of a narrative love-vision.³⁴ This ballad is further hybridised by its gestures towards the genre of romance: its questing knight-figure, its fair but enchanting lady. In particular these motifs often put readers of the poem in mind of episodes in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*: a romance that is also an epic.³⁵ Archaisms are deployed liberally, but not throughout the poem, as they are in Chatterton for example.³⁶ Etymologically the poem moves from 'roots' to 'relish': the homespun and familiarly 'native' lexis originating in Old English ('meads', 'gloam') to the Franco-flavoured Romance-derived vocabulary ('grot', 'sojourn'), hinting at the foreign and, at

³² Stillinger, *Poems*, p.p. 299-318 (p. 313, lines 292-1).

³³ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 74.

³⁴ Although a little over-zealous in the suggestion that she overturns the notion of Chartier as source in favour of the Ros translation for the first time, nevertheless, Caitlin Finlayson is extremely attentive to the ways in which Keats reacts to (rather than directly appropriates) the Middle English translation. Caitlin J. Finlayson, 'Medieval sources for Keatsian creation in La Belle Dame sans Merci', *Philological Quarterly*, 79 (2000), 225-47. For an earlier approach to the same topic, see Levinson, pp. 45-95, including endnote 8 on p. 90.

³⁵ Bennett notes that 'wretched wight' 'seems to be an explicit reference to Spenser'. Bennett, p. 118.

³⁶ The point is often made that the change from 'knight' to 'wight' is an archaising alteration. While this is strictly true linguistically, the 'knight-at-arms' can hardly be called contemporary (except in metaphorical applications). His presence in the knight-tradition clearly helps give the poem its archaic setting. McGann seems to be the first to discuss the change as archaising in detail. McGann, p. 1001-2.

times, verbally exotic other (Greek ‘zone’, arriving in English via the Romance languages).³⁷ Linguistically the poem is extremely heterogeneous, moving from the temporally remote to the contemporary, from familiarity to alterity, so that these registers are held in the contiguity of a kind of translatoresque, as if to suggest the bringing across of an ‘original’ source (such as the Chartier/Chaucer/Ros ‘La Belle Dame’).

The modes by which the poem graphs itself into literary history are similarly various. In epistolary intimacy, the poem is hand-written by the author, who, with his cancellations and inter-linear insertions, creates a metaphorical palimpsest of his own manuscript. Scribal copies of the poem are produced (perhaps, in the case of Brown, acting as Keats’s amanuensis), slightly altering the poem at each stage of its transmission. More substantial re-writings occur, including the rearrangement of some of the poem’s materials, in collaboration with, or perhaps solely at the hands of editor and compositor, as the poem makes its passage into that very ephemeral of printed textual manifestations, the periodical.

I wish to propose that what we have in action here is a model of textual culture with recognisable and relatively well-documented precedents in the middle ages. Bonaventura’s famous thirteenth-century fourfold model of making a book (*quadruplex est modus faciendi librum*) grants differing degrees of compositional authority to *scriptor*, *compiler*, *commentator* and *auctor*.³⁸ To which John Burrow adds that only *translator*

³⁷ Lines 13, 41, 29, 45 & 18 respectively. Stillinger, *Poems*, pp. 357-9. See Bennett, pp. 114-9 for more detail on the various lexical registers of the poem.

³⁸ Cited in Malcolm Parkes, ‘The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book’, in *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays presented to Richard William Hunt*, ed. by J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), pp. 115-41 (pp. 127-8).

seems absent.³⁹ According to this model of textual production, a scribe is one who writes others' words; a compiler one who rearranges others' words while writing them; a commentator writes others' words while glossing them with a few of his/her own; the author writes both his and others' words (*sua et aliena*), but (reversing the role of the commentator), with his/her own words at the centre of the production. These types of literary creator are not different in kind in Bonaventura's scheme, for an author also writes another's words into the text, just as the scribe does. Although the scribe is described as writing the words of others exclusively, adding nothing and changing nothing (*nihil addendo vel mutando*), Burrow notes that mediaeval practice is often at odds with theory in this respect:

He 'adds and changes' not only inadvertently, like the compositor, but also deliberately. He replaces obscure expressions with more familiar ones, omits and rewrites passages, and sometimes adds passages from other sources or even passages of his own composition. Thus a *scriptor* may also at times perform the functions of *compiler*, *commentator*, *translator*, and *auctor*.⁴⁰

If this suggests that we might do well to see Brown, Woodhouse and Hunt and his compositors as scribes,⁴¹ and therefore on the same continuum of authorship as Keats, it surely also encourages us to see Keats as something of the mediaeval *scriptor* in his rewritings, omissions, additions and alterations both to his sources and his own work.⁴²

³⁹ John Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Burrow does not admit in this passage that a modern compositor might deliberately change texts, but print manuals make it clear that deliberate changes were expected to be made in the print shop. See Stillinger, *Poems*, pp. 8-9.

⁴² Levinson's notion of the *Indicator* text as a translation of a text in the knight-tradition is an intriguing and well-argued one, though in concentrating on one text as a translation of another, it has to leave out a wider panoply of scriptorial and auctorial interventions. See Levinson, p. 66.

Seeing the mode of production of 'La Belle Dame' as mediaevalizing might help us accommodate some of the other textual difficulties it presents us with. To begin with Hunt might be exonerated for whatever part he played in the perpetuation and evolution of the poem's natural history. As Chaytor cautioned long ago, 'to copy and circulate another man's book might be regarded as a meritorious action in the age of manuscript'.⁴³ Nor need the poem's own mutually contradicting dual traditions seem troubling. Mediaevalists have long been used to dealing with two textual traditions for *The Canterbury Tales* (one centred on the Hengwrt manuscript, one on the Ellesmere) and even four *Piers Plowmen* is not thought uncommonly many. Theories of mediaeval authorship account for these variations and divergences partly by reference to the role of audience; 'development proceeded by trial and error, the audience being the means of experiment'.⁴⁴ The evolving nature of Keats's texts in response to George's circumstances, Z's review and the presumed readership of *The Indicator* are also easily incorporated into this mediaevalist textual economy.⁴⁵ Mediaeval manuscript culture is often felt to be characterized by a residual orality, although the truth is more its co-existence with an ongoing oral culture.⁴⁶ Such an oral-chirographic culture actively

⁴³ Henry John Chaytor, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1945), p. 1.

⁴⁴ Chaytor, p. 3.

⁴⁵ The reader may wish to ask whether it was Keats's intention to mediaevalize in the modes of textual production for this, otherwise uncontroversially, mediaevalist poem. I would argue that the plural sense of what (an) author(s) is/are, implied by this model of production, renders the question inoperative, or at least in need of the kind of serious recalibration that is beyond the scope of this current essay.

⁴⁶ For the idea of residual orality in the Middle Ages, see generally Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, rev edn (London: Routledge, 1982; 1997), and e.g. p. 119.

encourages and endorses textual variation in response to audience as an index of skill and creativity, at all stages on the continuum of authorship outlined above:

To a certain extent every minstrel is a more or less creative poet. But a poem is never repeated in exactly the same words even by the same man; and in the course of years changes may be introduced which apparently render it unrecognisable.⁴⁷

In effect, Keats is both his own source and minstrel. That the 'La Belle Dame' cycle of poems should be residually oral in nature is clearly signalled by their accretion of the sub-title 'A Ballad' at exactly the moment that the poem moves from a condition of exclusive authorship to its more explicitly collaborative state of transcription, the Brown and Woodhouse copies. The Ballad genre is itself a useful vehicle for transmitting and tracking oral-chirographic cultural practices into the age of print, originating as it does, somewhere in the middle ages, but being recorded textually in the late eighteenth century by antiquarians such as Bishop Percy (and, incidentally providing the impetus for a new poetics, not only radical in its aesthetics and politics, but perhaps also in its hybridised oral-typographic modes of production and reproduction). We need to admit the textual plurality an individual poem, to talk of the poem 'Les Belles Dames' or of the 'La Belle Dame' poems. We need to be prepared to see any given text, not as a fixed, ideal object, but more as a single snapshot of a moment in a continuing process of textual evolution; in its unfixability the ballad is in fact the ideal genre.

Many wider implications of this theory of mediaevalist textual economy lie beyond the scope of this essay, and much work remains to be done, but for Keats's 'La Belle Dame' the effects are clear. We do not have to choose between the knight and the wight. We can read both traditions and the traditions can be made to read each other.

⁴⁷ Chaytor, p. 119.

This means, to give but one example, that if we pursue Robertson's argument that the knight-figure is George, the shift from 'knight-at-arms' to 'wretched wight' might be said to mirror George's further sinking into dejection as his financial circumstances worsen in America. There is no need to sacrifice a poem of mutual lovemaking for a poem of magical seduction or vice versa. As Dylan might have said to his brass-bedded Lady (because despite the literary non-argument of the 90s we don't have to choose between Zimmerman and Keats either), 'you can have your manna cake and eat it too'.

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